# PARENT EDUCATION: PERCEIVED NEEDS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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### INTRODUCTION

The history of parent education has been long and varied. Traditionally, parents and other relatives have provided information on childrearing practices, methods of discipline and other practical advice on parenting. There is some evidence that a need for a wider circle of "experts" was and is requested by parents.

Before 1820, mothers met regularly in small home study groups, referred to as "maternal associations," to discuss parenting problems. In 1888 the Society for the Study of Child Nature, the oldest private organization with a continuous parent education program, was formed. Federal programs designed to provide information for parents or prospective parents were implemented in the early 1900's. These included the Children's Bureau, county demonstration agents (who worked for the Cooperative Extension Service) and the Public Health Service. Despite these historical roots, it was not until the 1960's that parent education gained national recognition through highly financed federal efforts (1).

Parent education has been defined as an activity designed to assist parents in the optimum performance of their roles. One of the assumptions made by parent educators is that parents are the prime teachers of their children. This has been highlighted by the work of many researchers who have stressed the importance of what parents do and do not do with their children. Parents influence how children learn to think, use language, feel about themselves and others, and organize their experiences. In addition to childrearing information, parent education deals with many other aspects of family life as well.

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Parents seem to be eager for information that would make parenting easier and more fulfilling. In 1976, three of every four adults in the United States approved "offering courses to parents as a regular part of the public educational system (3)". These findings are supported by the 1976-77 American Family Report, which found that although 90 percent of today's parents would still have children if they had to do it over again, they "would welcome help to make the job easier (4)". In North Dakota this need was confirmed by a survey of over 5,000 members of North Dakota Extension Homemakers Clubs. These people were asked to identify general topics they would like more information about in their state and local meetings. Their first topic request was "parent-child relations."

Although the need for parent education appears to be established at both the national and local level, the method of delivering parent education and the content of parent education programs vary from community to community. It has been suggested that the most successful parent education occurs when the information is presented is relevant to the needs of parents. A criterion for success is that the information must be readily accessible to parents. Little is currently known about parents' use of specific information sources regarding childrearing, the usefulness of these sources, and parents' expressed need for information about childrearing.

# **Subjects**

A questionnaire to identify needs for and sources of childrearing information among families in North Daktoa was distributed to 1500 families. Subjects were selected through randomly selected schools in each of the eight planning regions of North Dakota. Four rural and four urban schools were selected from each planning region. In each cooperating school, children in first, third and sixth grades were provided with a questionnaire to take home to their parents. The completed questionnaires were returned to researchers at North Dakota State University. A total of 819 families returned the survey, 463 rural families and 356 urban families. A breakdown of respondents by residence and grade of child is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. The Sample Parent Groups** 

Groups		Number Sent	Number Responding	Percent of families responding
	Rural	250	154	18.8
Grade 1				
	Urban	250	127	15.6
	Rural	250	160	19.5
Grade 3				
	Urban	250	111	13.5
	Rural	250	149	18
Grade 6				
Grado o	Urban	250	118	14.6
Total		1500	819	100

NOTE: Families living in communities of less than 2,500 people were classified as rural, remaining families were classified as urban.

The demographic information indicated that most of the respondents were married (95 percent of the sample). Five percent were either divorced, separated or widowed. The majority of parents responding to the questionnaire were between 30 and 39 years old (62 percent), with 15 percent between 20 and 29 years old, 19 percent between 40 and 49 years old and 4 percent between 50 and 59 years old. All but 7 percent of the sample had completed high school.

The survey was developed to obtain information concerning parents' use of and preference for various sources of advice on parenting and childrearing information.

Items relevant to these areas came from published studies of parenting needs (5, 6). Section one of the questionnaire consisted of 19 possible sources of parenting information. Respondents were asked whether or not they had used each source and to rate the helpfulness of the source on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = not at all helpful, 5 = very helpful). Section two consisted of 28 items of childrearing information which might be of interest to parents. Respondents were asked to mark those topics which would be most helpful to them in their childrearing.

Several additional questions were asked concerning demographic information: age, education, residence, and number of ages of children in the family.

### Results and Discussion

Of the 19 sources of information listed, 50 percent or more of the rural and urban respondents reported using books, pediatrician or family physician, parents, teachers, friends, magazines, parents-in-law, relatives, pamphlets and television. (See Table 2). Except for books, the five most useful sources of information (those rating source as helpful or very helpful) were people (parents, friends, teachers, physicians).

Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences between rural and urban parents in their use of information sources. The top 11 sources of information were the same for rural and urban respondents.

The frequency of use did not seem to relate to ratings of helpfulness. Television, magazines, newspapers and pamphlets were used frequently by families, but received lower ratings of helpfulness. On the other hand, sources of information such as school guidance counselor, church personnel, Cooperative Extension, babysitters, classes and mental health centers were used less often but received higher helpfulness scores. It appears that parents may use many standard sources of parenting information because they have become routine and easily available. Television, magazines and pamphlets cover a large number of topics but generally with limited depth. Apparently, parents need more specific and detailed information and support obtained from less convenient sources such as counselors, books, Cooperative Extension and classes.

Table 3 indicates the preference for various sources of information expressed by parents of different age groups (20-29 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years, 50-59

Table 2. Use, helpfulness and parents' preferences for sources of parenting information by rural and urban by residence.

	Percen	t Using	Parent Rat	Ing Heipfui	Preference Rankings		
Sources	Rurai (N = 463)	Urban (N = 356)	Rural (N = 463)	Urban (N = 356)	Rurai (N = 463)	Urban (N = 356)	
Pediatrician or family physician	86*	79*	74	70	2**	2**	
School guidance counselor	12	21	44	50	19	15	
eacher	78*	76*	53	64	4**	4**	
Minister or other church personnel	41	34	61	64	12	13	
Cooperative Extension	13	7	48	48	18	19	
our parents	78*	78*	67*	66	3**	3**	
our parents-in-law	65	61	57	63	7	7	
Relatives	60	60	55	56	8	8	
riends	74*	73*	53*	50	5**	5**	
Babysitters	21	17	33	27	16	17	
elevision	51	50	22	26	10	10	
Books	86*	84*	61	65	1**	1**	
Classes and discussion groups	37	39	66	43	13	12	
Magazines	70 <b>*</b>	67*	34	39	6**	6**	
Newsletters	25	22	38	39	15	14	
lewspapers	45	40	22	20	11	11	
Pamphlets	54	50	32	34	9	9	
Radio	25	21	26	31	14	16	
Mental health center	14	14	59	63	17	18	

<sup>\*</sup>The 6 highest percentages

\*\*The top 6 rankings

Table 3. Use, helpfulness and parents' preferences for sources of parenting information by age of parent.

	Percent Using			Parent Rating Helpful			Preference Rankings					
Sources	20-29 (N = 126)	30-39 (N = 508)	40-49 (N = 154)	50-59 (N = 31)	20-29 (N = 126)	30-39 (N = 508)	40-49 (N = 154)	50-59 (N = 31)	20-29 (N = 126)	30-39 (N = 508)	40-49 (N = 154)	50-59 (N = 31)
Pediatrician or family physician	86*	83*	84*	73*	71	74	6	82	3**	2**	1**	3**
School guidance counselor	12	15	24	30	60	44	44	33	18	17	16	15
Teacher	85*	80*	71*	77*	63	59	59	52	4**	3**	3**	2**
Minister or other church personnel	30	39	41	53	46	66	62	63	13	12	11	8
Cooperative Extension	11	10	15	10	50	43	48	67	19	19	18	19
Your parents	91*	79*	70*	53	72	68	64	75	1**	4**	4**	10
Your parents-in-law	75*	64*	52	53	57	60	56	69	6**	7	9	11
Relatives	74	62	54	53	57	55	55	56	7	8	8	9
Friends	75*	70*	68*	59*	68	69	59	61	5**	6**	5**	5**
Babysitters	22	20	18	17	38	31	26	Ö	15	15	17	18
Television	57	53	39	53	21	25	22	19	9	9	13	7
Books	87*	86*	82*	80*	58	63	66	63	2**	1**	2**	1**
Classes/discussion groups	34	42	40	\$30	60	66	59	56	12	11	12	14
Magazines	69	71*	65*	63*	34	38	35	32	8	5**	6**	4**
Newsletters	23	25	24	20	28	39	42	33	14	13	15	16
Newspapers	35	46	47	57*	11	23	19	24	11	10	10	6**
Pamphlets	53	10	58	50	32	29	44	20	10	18	7	12
Radio	20	21	28	37	25	30	23	27	16	14	14	13
Mental health center	15	15	12	17	47	65	42	20	17	16	19	17

<sup>\*</sup>The 6 highest percentages

yers). Though the rankings of preferred sources differ for each age group, there is general consistency in the six highest ranked sources. The sources common to each age group are books, family physician, teachers and friends.

The information sources of guidance counselors, parents, parents-in-law, relatives and television were found to be significantly different for the various age groups. Twenty and 30-year-olds reported using parents, parents-in-law and relatives more than 40 and 50-year-olds. Younger respondents, 20 and 30-year-olds, tended to use guidance counselors less and television more than 40 and 50-year-olds.

Based on the percentage using information, magazines were preferred by the three older groups. Parents-in-law were a preferred source only by those in their 20's, and newspapers were a preferred source only in the 59 to 59-year-old group. Table 3 also includes information on percentage of use and helpfulness of sources by age of respondent.

As in Table 2, Table 3 indicates a preference of parents of different ages for people as sources of information about childrearing. Family and friends rank highly in the preferences of most age groups. It is interesting to note, however, that, with the exception of parents in their 20's, the three most preferred sources are books, family physicians, and teachers. This might suggest an interest in more objective sources of childrearing information. A further consideration is that all of the responding parents have school-age childrearing information. This might not be true of parents with preschool and high school age children.

# **Parenting Topics**

Parents were asked to check those topics that would provide information helpful to them in their parenting.

Each of the 819 respondents checked at least one of the 28 topics. A summary of percentage of parental response, by age of parent and for the total sample, is found in Table 4. The six topics with the highest percentage of response are starred. Analysis revealed that there were no significant rural-urban differences in response.

Significant age differences were found for two topics, improving language and explaining the natural world. Older subjects requested more information about improving language than did younger subjects. Conversely, younger subjects wanted more information explaining the natural world than did older subjects. Significant differences were found for other topics by age groups.

The six topics with the highest response form the total sample were: discussing topics like sex, death, and divorce; building self-confidence; guidance and discipline; teaching enjoyment of learning; assisting growth and learning, and preventive health care. When each of the four parental age groups (20-29 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years, 50-59 years) are examined, some variation in topics is found. Parents in their 20's are interested in the topics expressing feelings and preventive health care and seem to be less interested in teaching enjoyment of learning, thinking and problem solving than are the other age groups. The 30-39 age group parallels the total sample in choice of parenting topics. The only difference is in ranking the top six topics. The older two age groups varied slightly from the total sample. When the responses of 40 to 49-year-olds are examined alone, the topics of preventive health and getting along in the family appear in the six topics with the highest percent of response. Absent from this group is guidance and discipline and assisting growth and learning. The responses of the 50 to 59-year-old age group differ from the responses of the total sample by only one topic. In the oldest age group, the topic respect for others received a higher percentage of response than assisting growth and learning.

<sup>\*\*</sup>The top 6 rankings

Table 4. Percent wishing information on parenting topics by age of parent.

Parent Rating							
20-29 (N = 136)	30-39 (N = 508)	40-49 (N = 154)	50-59 (N = 31)	Totai (N = 819)			
38	37	33	35	37			
60*	57*	55	45	56*			
69*	70*	69*	74*	70*			
55	47	44	39	47			
36	27	24	39	28			
				32			
				55			
				41			
	· <del>-</del>	•		•			
37	36	31	29	35			
				46			
				36			
				60*			
		56		51			
56*	53	53	52	53			
44	37	31	29	36			
				50			
		57*		57*			
		30		20			
55	62*	66*	68*	62*			
38	41	38	48	40			
17	10	9	3	11			
39	38	36	42	38			
	19			21			
	51			51			
				49			
<b>.</b>							
79*	73*	67*	71*	73*			
				24			
				40			
	(N = 136)  38 60* 69* 55 36 39 62* 40 37 47 41 67* 53 56* 44 51 54 21 55	38 37 60° 57° 69° 70° 55 47  36 27 39 31 62° 53 40 42  37 36 47 46 41 35 67° 60° 53 49 56° 53  44 37 51 48 54 58° 21 18 55 62° 38 41 17 10 39 38 24 19 49 51 51 51 48  79° 73° 25 22	(N = 136)         (N = 508)         (N = 154)           38         37         33           60°         57°         55           69°         70°         69°           55         47         44           36         27         24           39         31         34           62°         53         60°           40         42         37           37         36         31           47         46         48           41         35         35           67°         60°         56           53         49         56           53         53         53           44         37         31           51         48         55           54         58°         57°           21         18         30           55         62°         66°           38         41         38           17         10         9           39         38         36           24         19         23           49         51         57°           51	(N = 136)         (N = 508)         (N = 154)         (N = 31)           38         37         33         35           60*         57*         55         45           69*         70*         69*         74*           55         47         44         39           36         27         24         39           39         31         34         26           62*         53         60*         45           40         42         37         39           37         36         31         29           47         46         48         29           41         35         35         42           67*         60*         56         52*           53         49         56         55*           56*         53         53         52           44         37         31         29           51         48         55         45           54         58*         57*         52*           21         18         30         10           55         62*         66*         68*           <			

<sup>\*</sup>The 6 highest percentages

There seems to be more similarities than differences among the age groups, which makes it difficult to clearly categorize these topics within or across age groups. Thinking, learning and problem solving skills seem to be concerns of parents age 30 and older. Younger parents, presumably with younger children, are requesting information about assisting growth and learning, preventive health care, guidance and discipline and expressing feelings.

## **Summary and Implications**

In this survey to identify parent education needs and current information sources about childrearing, 819 parents reported using people as their primary sources. These people included pediatrician or family physician, parents, teachers, friends and parents-in-law. Non-people sources highly utilized by parents were books, magazines and newspapers. There were no rural-urban differences in sources of information used and there were slight age differences.

Parents' need for information covered a wide range of topics. The six topics checked most often by the participating parents were discussing difficult topics like sex, death and divorce; building self-confidence; thinking and problem solving; guidance and discipline; teaching enjoyment of learning, and assisting growth and learning. As with sources of information, no rural-urban differences in needs for information and only slight age differences were found.

These data have important implications for parent educators and other family life specialists relative to planning parenting programs, including methods of transmitting childrearing information and selecting an audience for various parent education programs.

A common method for delivery of childrearing information is through print media (newsletters, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and books). With the exception of books and maagazines, parents report low usage of the print media and that when newsletters, newspapers and pamphlets are used, these are not found very helpful. This suggests a need to use alternative methods for optimizing the spread of parenting information, such as providing programs for those sources of information used by parents. This would mean focusing on secondary groups such as teachers, grandparents, pediatricians and friends rather than targeting parents themselves. The data also suggest that parents do not seem to associate some sources with parent education (ministers, church personnel, Cooperative Extension, mental health organizations, school guidance counselors). If these groups are to serve as effective sources of parenting education, perhaps they need to increase their visibility as well as utilize more effective sources in their programs.

The topics of interest to North Dakota families are quite clearly defined. Parents want information on approaching sensitive topics like sex, death an divorce with their children. This implies a need to provide parents with age-appropriate, non-value laden, factual information on these sensitive topics.

Another suggestion, in terms of target audience, is that parent educators seek out small groups of parents with similar information needs rather than larger audiences which might have a broader range of interests. The data reported indicate that grouping parents by their ages may be a less than satisfactory education method since parents across age groups were interested in similar topics. Large groupings of parents may be an effective and economical method of parent education.

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comparable areas should be pursued. Third, analysts should present their analyses in terms of multiple scenarios and ranges of impacts. Finally, effective impact monitoring and periodic reassessments are needed throughout a project's construction.

Three key aspects of the Coal Creek impact management program were the availability of community-specific impact projections and updates, existence of a mechanism for providing needed front-end financing for community services and facilities, and effective use of county zoning authority to control local growth patterns. Similar mechanisms should be considered in designing impact management programs for future projects.

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